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Special Political and Decolonization Committee (Fourth Committee)

Summary record of the 17th meeting

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Chairman: Mr. Acharya (Nepal)

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The meeting was called to order at 10.15 a.m.

Agenda item 29: Effects of atomic radiation (A/61/46 and Corr.1)

1. **The Chairman** invited the Secretary of the United Nations Scientific Committee on the Effects of Atomic Radiation to make a presentation on the Committee's work.
2. **Mr. Crick** (Secretary of the United Nations Scientific Committee on the Effects of Atomic Radiation) recalled that the Committee, which had been established in 1955, had its mandate renewed annually to assess the levels, effects and risks of ionizing radiation worldwide and to disseminate its findings. It had 21 member States, although other States and organizations provided data. Its funding came from the regular budget of the United Nations rather than the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), as was sometimes thought, although UNEP was in charge of administering the Committee. The secretariat staff comprised one Professional and two General Service staff. The Committee's annual meeting was attended not only by its member States but also by 100 cost-free experts of the highest calibre. Every four or five years, it published its findings, which were greatly appreciated by the scientific community. The latest substantive reports, issued in 2000 and 2001, would profit from being shorter, but producing a synthesis required extra resources. Generally speaking, the Committee was better at communicating with scientists than with the General Assembly or the public.
3. The Committee's functions were, first, to identify issues that needed to be addressed. Secondly, it produced scientific assessments, on the basis of data provided by States and organizations, which often had a profound impact. For example, in the early 1990s, the Committee had shown that the risk from ionizing radiation was greater than had been thought. As a result, dose limits for the public and workers had been reduced and that was reflected in the legislation of many States. Thirdly, it considered global knowledge management, a field in which technology was constantly changing. The Committee's findings were passed on to the International Commission on Radiological Protection or direct to various United Nations agencies, which, in turn, used them as the basis for their own conventions or regulations.
4. He gave a brief explanation of the effects of various doses of radiation, which, at very high levels, such as those encountered by the firemen who had dealt with the accident at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant in 1986, could lead to burns, radiation sickness and death and, at lower levels, to an increasing risk of cancer. Although it could safely be said that the higher the dose of radiation, the higher the risk of cancer, it was impossible, in view of the many other causes of cancer, to attribute any particular case to radiation. In order to gain insight into the cancer risks of relatively low doses of radiation, the Committee had carried out a review of all new relevant studies and followed up exposed populations on a longer-term basis, particularly survivors of the bombs that had fallen on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. That review was set out in the scientific report contained in the report on its fifty-fourth session (A/61/46, sect. II.A). The Committee had concluded that there was no major change in the risks of cancer.
5. Section B of the scientific report considered cardiovascular disease, which was adversely affected by high doses of radiation. The Committee had found that there was no clear evidence of the effect of lower doses. Section C dealt with "non-targeted" or "indirect" radiation, on which there was a plethora of important new research. The overall significance was as yet unclear and further surveillance would be needed. One example of a new discovery was the fact that radiation could hit one cell and cause DNA mutation in surrounding cells as well.
6. In section D, the Committee had looked into whether radiation exposure affected the immune system. It had undertaken a major review of exposed groups and animal and cellular studies. Its finding had been that high doses of radiation could have a depressive effect, while the effect of low doses was uncertain: both stimulatory and suppressive effects had been found. Lastly, section E considered the risks from radon, an inert radioactive gas that percolated from the soil and to which everyone was exposed. Residential data were compared with earlier data on miners and the Committee's conclusion had been that there was no need to change the risk factor for radon. Much work had been done, using new cellular, genetic and microbiology techniques and taking advantage of longer patient follow-up periods. Although differences did emerge in detailed analyses, the overall risk factors remained essentially unchanged.

7. At its session in May 2006, the Committee, which was celebrating its fiftieth anniversary, had approved five annexes for publication and reviewed the drafts of five others.

8. The agenda for the 2007 session included the studies envisaged for publication in 2007, on Chernobyl radiation levels and effects, accident exposures and public and worker exposures, and in 2008, on medical exposures and effects on non-human biota, and a discussion of the future programme of work.

9. Between 1980 and 1992, the Scientific Committee's annual budget had generally declined in real terms, even as the cost-free assistance available to it was falling. A P-5 post had been abolished in the 1992-1993 biennium, precisely when the pace of communication and scientific development had been stepped up and the number of references to the Committee's work in the scientific community had soared.

10. The budgetary constraints that had caused his predecessor to resign and had overburdened the secretariat had obviously had an impact on the quality of the Scientific Committee's work and its outreach to the public. Its studies were no longer as assuredly reliable, thus undermining confidence and credibility, and there had been delays in their publication — the twentieth-anniversary Chernobyl report being a case in point — which in turn had hampered the work of the other specialized agencies in the field; it had become impossible to engage first-class experts, and difficult to address cross-disciplinary aspects. What the Committee needed was the restoration of the P-5 post, so that there would be a permanent staff member with expertise in radiation biology, communications and coordination, who would keep up with the pace of scientific development and ensure continuity. Also, taking inflation into account, more funds were needed to enable the Scientific Committee to regain the ground lost.

11. The financial crisis was seriously hindering the output of a body known for its independence and scientific objectivity that was highly respected by Governments, other international organizations and the scientific community, and whose findings critically underpinned international radiation protection programmes. It was certainly more desirable to develop global consensus in the field through the sharing of

knowledge and information, before the intrusion of politics in the form of national or regional initiatives.

12. **Ms. Gatehouse** (Australia), speaking as Chairman of the Scientific Committee during its 2006 session, said that for 50 years the Committee had served a vital function, providing an authoritative scientific review of sources, levels and effects of ionizing radiation. It had gone on to address new challenges in relation to radiation exposure and its effects on humans and on non-human organisms, as they had arisen. Governments and organizations throughout the world now relied on the Scientific Committee's estimates as the scientific basis for evaluating radiation risk, establishing radiation-protection and safety standards and regulating radiation sources. Within the United Nations system, for instance, radiation health standards of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) were based on its estimates. The Committee's 20-year review of the health effects of the Chernobyl accident was being awaited with anticipation.

13. The current level of funding for the Scientific Committee's work seemed to be inadequate, diminishing its effectiveness even as authoritative assessments of radiation effects were becoming more crucial in many areas, including the long-term management of radioactive waste, the potential impact of malevolent uses of radioactive material, climate change, or the place of nuclear power in achieving energy security.

14. She introduced a draft resolution under item 29, the text of which would be circulated the following day. The draft resolution requested the Scientific Committee to continue to review important issues in the field of ionizing radiation, requested the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) to continue providing effective support for the Committee and to ensure the strengthening of its current funding and addressed the question of the membership of the Committee. The sponsors hoped that the draft resolution would be adopted by consensus.

15. **Ms. Kanerva** (Finland), speaking on behalf of the European Union; the acceding countries Bulgaria and Romania; the candidate countries Croatia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Turkey; the stabilization and association process countries Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, and in addition, Iceland, Moldova, Norway and Ukraine, said

that the report of the Scientific Committee on its fifty-fourth session (A/61/46), confirming its status as the principal international body in its field, would be indispensable for drafting national and international standards to protect against the effects of atomic radiation. The European Union fully supported the Committee's work and would continue to exchange information with it. It encouraged the Committee to pursue its study of the long-term health and environmental effects of ionizing radiation, as in the case of the Chernobyl accident; urged it to continue cooperating and exchanging information with other international organizations in its field; and welcomed its efforts to make its findings available to the wider public on its website.

16. She called for a discussion of the Scientific Committee's funding, which, since the 1990s, had not seen an increase in predictable resources commensurate with the growing interest in its scientific work and greater international concern about the whole issue of radiation protection. Furthermore, the issue of the possible enlargement of the membership of the Scientific Committee should be considered.

17. **Ms. Bubnovskaya** (Belarus) said that Belarus, the country that had suffered most from the accident at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant 20 years earlier, had, in cooperation with foreign States and international governmental and non-governmental organizations, done considerable work on minimizing the effects of the accident. In the process, Belarusian specialists had collected unique data and acquired considerable practical experience, which they shared with a range of international organizations. Belarus felt, however, that it should also share its expertise with the Scientific Committee. Its intention of joining the Committee had been expressed in the outcome document of a conference held in Minsk in April 2006 to mark the twentieth anniversary of the Chernobyl accident, which had called on the General Assembly to consider expanding the Committee's membership.

18. Her Government had set up a special interdepartmental working group to consider and resolve issues relating to Belarus's membership in the Committee. If its bid for membership was successful, Belarus could offer a highly qualified representative. In its 50 years of existence, the issue of the Committee's composition had been discussed only twice, the last time being in 1986. During that time, several States, particularly Belarus, had acquired specialized

knowledge of the effects of atomic radiation. Moreover, an expanded membership would breathe new life into the Committee. It would be beneficial both for the new members and for the wider international community.

19. **Ms. Hernández Toledano** (Cuba), commending the Scientific Committee for its excellent work over the past 50 years and the constant flow of information it provided to Member States, said that it was unjustifiable that tens of thousands of nuclear weapons, many of them ready for immediate use, should continue to exist, even though it was well-known that the harmful health effects of atomic radiation could last more than six decades. Cuba remained firmly committed to the total prohibition and elimination of all forms of nuclear weapons and completely opposed to the use of nuclear energy for military purposes.

20. Cuba had offered significant assistance to the people of Ukraine after the Chernobyl accident: it had for 16 years been conducting a rehabilitation programme for the victims, under which almost 20,000 Ukrainian children and accompanying family members had been brought to Cuba for medical treatment, and over 10,000 Ukrainians had been treated in a Crimean sanatorium staffed and advised by Cuban doctors. In the process, Cuba had gathered and published primary data on the impact of radiation exposure on children, which had been used by the Scientific Committee and by various United Nations specialized agencies.

21. The expert, objective work being done by the Scientific Committee was extremely important, and its collaboration with Member States and the relevant agencies of the United Nations system should be expanded. Applications of the Scientific Committee's findings would prove beneficial to human health and to the environment. Its financial difficulties were therefore a matter of concern, should they curtail its ability to work properly.

22. **Mr. Taleb** (Syrian Arab Republic) said that his delegation supported the Scientific Committee's request to UNEP to revise and strengthen its current financing, for it should be enabled to carry on with its useful, independent work. Member States, United Nations specialized agencies and other scientific institutions should themselves continue to provide the Special Committee with the high-quality information on which its studies depended.

23. The Syrian policy on nuclear technology was that it should be used for peaceful purposes to promote development and prosperity worldwide. It should be made available without discrimination or selectivity, but the constraints on access by developing countries were a matter of concern.

24. His Government had always called for the elimination of nuclear stockpiles to avert nuclear danger to mankind and to contain the risk of ionizing radiation. It had been one of the first States to call for the establishment of a nuclear-weapon-free zone in the region of the Middle East and a zone free of weapons of mass destruction, and that was still its goal.

25. In 2003, the Group of Arab States had sponsored a draft resolution to that effect in the Security Council, calling for collective monitoring of the Middle East region under the aegis of the United Nations, so as to strengthen multilateral agreements on disarmament. The Syrian Arab Republic itself had become a party to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons in 1969 and had concluded an agreement with IAEA under its safeguards system. Israel was unique in its possession of nuclear weapons without any international supervision at all, and its refusal to adhere to the Non-Proliferation Treaty or implement the IAEA safeguards system was jeopardizing peace and security in the region and could set the stage for an environmental disaster on the order of Chernobyl. The people and the Governments of its neighbouring States had the right to know if Israeli power stations were secure and what activities were being carried out there, and the international community must put pressure on Israel to place its eight nuclear installations under IAEA monitoring.

26. Nuclear waste buried in the territories of developing countries and in the high seas posed a serious environmental risk of ionizing radiation. Israel's contention that it respected international disarmament agreements was undermined by the fact that it was known to be burying nuclear waste in the occupied Syrian Golan. Greater international cooperation was needed to avert a deadly danger there.

27. **Mr. Yamamoto (Japan)**, echoing the statements made by the Chairman of the Scientific Committee on the vital nature of its work and the reliance of Governments, international organizations and the scientific community on its authoritative findings and reports, observed that the Scientific Committee must

be enabled to continue studying the effects of ionizing radiation in order to ensure that its use was not harmful to human health or the environment. UNEP should therefore increase the Committee's current funding and consider alternative funding mechanisms in order to allow it to discharge its mandate fully.

28. As a sponsor of the draft resolution just introduced, Japan hoped that it would be adopted by consensus.

29. **Mr. Lynn (Myanmar)** said that two decades after the Chernobyl disaster, the adverse effects of that accident were still being felt by hundreds of thousands of people who had been forced to leave their homes to avoid exposure to radiation. Those effects underscored the need for all Member States to support the Scientific Committee in fulfilling its important mandate. His Government exercised the legitimate right to develop atomic energy for peaceful uses and had benefited from IAEA assistance in the fields of medicine, agriculture, engineering, technology and human resource development. The Agency had provided assistance through the Interregional Model Project on radiation protection and waste safety infrastructure. Furthermore, his Government was party to the Regional Co-operative Agreement for Asia and the Pacific Region and had ratified the Treaty on the Southeast Asia Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone, which sought to protect the region from environmental pollution and the hazards posed by radioactive waste and material. His delegation commended the Scientific Committee for its work and reiterated its assurance of continued cooperation.

30. **Mr. Ahmad (Pakistan)** said that his Government appreciated the work of the Scientific Committee in promoting wider knowledge and understanding of the risks, levels and effects of atomic and ionizing radiation on human beings and the environment. The Scientific Committee should be provided with the necessary resources to carry out its mandate and should open up its membership in order to benefit from the expertise of other States. Such an increase in membership would undoubtedly promote international cooperation. His Government hoped to become a member of the Scientific Committee and had the capacity to share and contribute expertise. In that connection, the Pakistan Nuclear Regulatory Authority (PNRA) was an independent regulatory body which dealt with nuclear and radioactive safety-related issues in accordance with the latest IAEA standards. His

delegation would be taking the necessary steps to become a member of the Scientific Committee.

31. **Mr. Desmoures** (Argentina) said that his Government and Argentine scientists had contributed to the work of the Scientific Committee since its establishment by the General Assembly in 1955. The protection regulations against the effects of radiation in Argentina had been based on the evaluations made by the Scientific Committee. The Scientific Committee's conclusion that it was not necessary to change current risk estimates for cancer and the hereditary effects of radiation (A/61/46, para. 9) was particularly important because it confirmed that the protection and security regulations in force had been based on correct risk estimates.

32. His Government welcomed the fact that the Scientific Committee had agreed to conduct a thorough study on the detrimental effects attributed to low doses of radiation. Referring to paragraph 5 of the report, he noted that it was a problem generic to all radiation exposure and not limited to Chernobyl. His delegation urged the Scientific Committee to resolve that issue in a timely manner and also reiterated an earlier request to UNEP to continue to support the important work of the Scientific Committee, in accordance with paragraph 9 of General Assembly resolution 60/98.

33. **Mr. Capelle** (Marshall Islands) said that the effects of atomic radiation were a matter of the utmost concern to the people of the Marshall Islands due to the series of nuclear tests that had been conducted in those islands by the United States between 1946 and 1958. Many inhabitants continued to suffer from serious long-term health effects and others remained displaced from their homes due to ongoing contamination. The devastating social and environmental impact of atomic radiation in the Marshall Islands underscored the urgent need for scientific consensus regarding the effects of atomic radiation. Following the American nuclear tests, scientists had made conflicting assessments regarding both the degree of remaining radioactive contamination as well as safe levels of human exposure. For that reason, the objective research and authoritative conclusions of the Scientific Committee were invaluable. His Government requested support for the Marshall Islands Changed Circumstances Petition, which had been submitted to the United States Congress in 2000, and would also appreciate the assistance of the Scientific Committee

and all Member States with experience in the restoration of environments contaminated by radiation.

34. Faced with conflicting conclusions, it was difficult for his Government to establish policies on public health, environmental remediation and possible resettlement. He expressed the hope that the Scientific Committee would be provided an adequate operating budget and the kind of administrative and technical support that would enable it to give the Marshall Islands specific recommendations on the steps that needed to be taken. In that connection, his delegation strongly supported the resolution sponsored by Australia, which urged UNEP to strengthen the Scientific Committee's funding. Regrettably, it was not the first time the Marshall Islands had addressed that issue.

35. **Mr. Datsenko** (Ukraine) said that the Scientific Committee had been involved in the evaluation of radiation exposure from the Chernobyl accident from an early stage. Despite the conclusion that the vast majority of people would not suffer from the effects of radiation, there was still a heated scientific discussion on the number of deaths that could be traced to that accident. It was true that there had been a dramatic increase in thyroid cancer among people who had been exposed to radiation at a young age. However, there was no demonstrable rise in the incidence of solid cancers or leukaemia. It was significant that the Scientific Committee had extended its research on the collective doses of radiation to all parts of the world and had not limited that work to the Chernobyl area, and that it had introduced the new concept of the effect of chronic low-level exposure on future generations.

36. His delegation was grateful to the national and international organizations that had participated in the work of the Chernobyl Forum, which had been launched to review radiation-induced effects and to contribute to the Organization's strategy for recovery. The international conference entitled "Twenty Years after the Chernobyl Accident: Future Outlook", held in Ukraine in April, had drawn on international experience relating to radiation protection of the population and emergency workers.

37. His Government expected to continue its cooperation with the Scientific Committee and all parties concerned to counter the consequences of the Chernobyl accident and to promote economic recovery in the majority of the territories surrounding

Chernobyl, which had become safe for resettlement. His Government fully supported the Scientific Committee's plans to study the risks of radon, the cancer and non-cancer effects of radiation and cellular responses to radiation exposure. The funding of the Scientific Committee should be re-examined to ensure that it had the staffing levels and resources required to meet its considerable responsibilities.

The meeting rose at 11.55 a.m.